

UDC - 782

## Georgian Opera of the 1980s in the Context of World Opera Innovation Tendencies

Natia Dekanosidze

Doctor of Arts, assistant-professor at Tbilisi State Conservatoire  
V. Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire; 8-10 Griboedov str., Tbilisi 0108, Georgia

### **Abstract**

*20<sup>th</sup> century was marked with the search for the ways to overcome the crisis in Opera genre emerged at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In one case opera was renewed via basing on the tradition, in the other – via comprehended and avowed cast away of the tradition. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the innovation wave encompassed West-European and Russian composers' creative work. The borders of the genre expanded and opera already was in contact with other genres.*

*The afore-mentioned tendencies characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera appeared in Georgian opera in the 1980s. The appearance of first truly innovatory operas is related to Bidzina Kvernadze and Giya Kancheli. Two operas Kvernadze's "And it was in the eighth year" (1983) and Kancheli's "Music for the living" (1984) abolished stable frames and indicated new ways for the development of opera genre.*

*The storyline of Kvernadze's opera is shown as both epic and dramatic. In the libretto one story is shown to us in two different points of view, what determines dramaturgical and compositional originality of the opera. Two different points of view – literary origin's and the author's of the opera (composer and librettist) are contrasted.*

*Dramaturgical specificity of "Music for the Living" is connected with the theatrical aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera, such as: psychological poetics of the "representation theatre" and rejection of the plot twists and turns, schematic type of the fibula, tendency of depersonification, renewal of the Middle Ages miracle-play tradition, using the method of "theatre in the theatre" and others.*

**Keywords:** *opera, operatic, theatrical aesthetics, representational theatre, presentational theatre, psychologism, metaphoricity, libretto, mystery play, morality play, epos, drama, discourse.*

20<sup>th</sup> century was marked with the search for the ways to overcome the crisis in Opera genre emerged at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In one case opera was renewed via basing on the tradition, in the other hand – via comprehended and avowed cast away of the tradition.

The opera crisis was largely related to theatre crisis, theatrical aesthetics introduced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [1]. One of the most significant tendencies characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera is the alternation of theatrical poetics followed by the drastic change of the entire complex of musical-dramatic means. Romantic musical drama, culminating in Wagner's opera works, became the object of the throw off, sort of a reference point for "180 degree turn". This process denoted certain crisis of theatrical aesthetics, later called "representational theatre".

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the innovation wave encompassed West-European and Russian composers' creative work. The borders of the genre expanded and in the creative works of the composers such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Busoni, Malipiero, Brecht-Weill opera was in contact with other genres [Bayeva, 2006: 22]. Later the question was put more sharply: opera – anti-opera. B.A. Zimmerman's total theatre and M. Kagel's instrumental theatre "surmounts the borders not only of opera world, but of the shelter for opera genre – musical theatre as well" [Bayeva, 2006: 23].

It is noteworthy that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the word "operatics" acquires negative meaning and becomes the synonym of the conditionality of operatic aesthetics and any dramaturgical "cliché".

For instance today related to the phenomenon of operatics is the entire epoch of cinematography – 1930s, implying the tradition of “high spectacle”, prevalent in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is characterized with the replacement of lively, frank images of the film with scenic conditionality [3].

Due to conditional-illusory nature of operatic genre the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera denies its “name and origin”. In general one of the steadiest tendencies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is dissociation from the modus of operatics in the title of musical-dramaturgic works. For instance, composer Dallapiccola admitted that he avoided the term “opera” as the work title for self-defense. D. Milhaud named his opera “The Poor Sailor” (1926) “Complaint in Three Acts”, G. F. Malipiero referred to his operas as “Musical Dramas”, “Musical Comedies”, “Dramatic Expressions”. This 20<sup>th</sup> century tendency, as well as opera “stamps” indicated to the crisis not of the opera genre, but of certain aesthetics of operatic spectacle. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries Romanticism Traditions and art were regarded as false, illusory, artificial-conditional, distanced from the reality. However the 20<sup>th</sup> century unacceptability of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opera traditions was determined by “opera stamps”. In the formation of these stamps great is the share of stereotyped libretto. There were different ways to overcome the crisis. Romantic and realistic theatre constructed on the laws of emotion theatre is replaced by conditional theatre, based on the poetics of “presentational theatre”. Acknowledgement of the opposite nature of these theatrical systems becomes characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century is known for the interest in the forms of ancient theatre, such as antique tragedy, medieval mystery play, folk show, Commedia dell’arte, Oriental theatre traditions.

Presentational theatre is characterized with more generalized, conditional “show” of real occurrences, “estrangement effect”, ostentatious emphasis of the boundary between life and theatre, separation of personage and actor, human and mask. Presentational theatre applies more visual, plastic side and inner essence equals to that of exterior, expressionist, decorative.

Identity of inner and outer act as if excludes subjectivity, modus of psychologism and offers the audience objective material – free from dramaturgy, dictate of producer’s author’s will, does not subordinate their subjective interpretation. Presented to the audience is symbolically generalized scheme of events, attempt to show external essence of events, internal peculiarities of which should be guessed and concluded by the audience, which metaphorically actualizes the presentational theatre, its personages – symbols and general ideas. The poetics of representational theatre strives for lyrics and drama, whilst the poetics of presentational theatre may be in touch with epos [4].

Thus, paradoxical situation is created, conditionality, artificiality, illusory character of romantic opera – negatively evaluated by the 20<sup>th</sup> century composers is overcome by more increased conditionality, considered as an essential peculiarity of the genre. Despite style, genre and historical epoch operatic poetics is representative, therefore conditional.

One of the most significant tendencies characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera is the open manifestation of theatrical conditionality, metaphoricity of operatic performance. Due to this many 20<sup>th</sup> century composers apply myth and play. The operas of Stravinsky, Milhaud, Casella, R. Strauss, Malipiero, Honegger, Krenek and others are constructed on mythological plots.

Reinforcement of play aspect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera was expressed by introducing reader and choir-commentator, as well as by the application of “theatre in theatre” principle and means of non-personification, rendering dramaturgically independent meaning to pantomime episodes. The feature of conditionality is reinforced by the application of old theatrical genres with peculiar for them aesthetics of “presentational theatre”, such as mystery play, morality play, madrigal comedy, folk-ceremonial theatrical forms, etc.

Reinforcement of theatrical conditionality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera was accompanied by another peculiarity also expressed in literature, drama theatre and cinema: denial of traditional subject, plot, person acting in it and his psychology [5]. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century operas the act is extracted from time-spatial context and is shifted to the level of conditional generalization, space of eternity [6]. Thus, plot and schematic subjects expelled dramatic intrigue, traditional plot intrigue characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This tendency was related to the drastic change of artistic thinking principle – the primacy of rationality over emotion. Sensual perception of the world was banished

by the intellectualization tendency peculiar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the manifestations of this tendency is deep and detailed analysis of events, distrust to the only viewpoint of the work. In literature, dramatic art and cinema encountered are works, in which the same story is presented from several positions, from the viewpoints of different personages<sup>1</sup>.

The afore-mentioned tendencies characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera were manifested in Georgian opera from the 1980s. The appearance of the first truly innovative operas is related with Bidzina Kvernadze and Giya Kancheli. Two operas Kvernadze's "And it was in the Eighth Year" (premiered in 1983) and Kancheli's "Music for the Living" (premiered in 1984) abolished stable frames and indicated new ways for the development of opera genre.

Kvernadze's "And it was in the Eighth Year" is based on Iakob Tsurtaveli's hagiographic work "the Martyrdom of St. Shushanik" (5<sup>th</sup> c.) narrating about the martyrdom for Christianity and death of Shushanik the spouse of Georgian governor – pitiaksh. Shushanik has been canonized by Georgian Orthodox Church. Her name and story was intended to reinforce the faith among Christian parish. In Tsurtaveli's work the story of Shushanik's martyrdom is presented in black and white colours, where there is absolute kindness and absolute evil. Such polarization of kindness and evil is characteristic of hagiography. Robert Sturua's libretto of the opera is based on the original text of the primary source. Alongside this, Sturua also adds his own texts to the libretto. Basing on the original Sturua purposely displaces semantic accents of the literary original and enters a dispute with Tsurtaveli. This way authors of the opera invade sort of "tabooed territory" and push listeners to analyze historical occurrences and facts, and make their own conclusions. This is why in libretto the same history is regarded from two viewpoints, determining dramaturgical and compositional originality of the opera. Literary source is countered by author's "contrary idea". In the opera the same story is presented from two angles – epic and dramatic, from the viewpoint of the work's author – Iakob Tsurtaveli and from external viewpoint, where Tsurtaveli himself becomes a character, direct participant of occurrences, this is why in the opera the poetics of "presentational theatre" coexists parallel to that of romantic and realistic theatre. The narration and drama turn out to be different worlds and differently shed light on this or that situation. At the same time, the drama denies the narration and turns out to be more correct. In this contradistinction, marked out is the implication of the work, directed to the contemporaries. This implication touches upon a topical issue – confidence to the author. Can we trust the ruler, ecclesiastical figure and authority of printed word? Does there exist an objective viewpoint, free from any interests? Are our ideas of kindness and evil absolute? The idea of relativity of truth is the cultural achievement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The change of the Epoch's intellectual climate is reflected in the emergence of drama-discourses. Kvernadze's opera can be regarded as one of such works, the epic prologue of which presents the viewpoint of the original's author, act I explains these occurrences in dramatic activity and at the same time indirectly reflects different viewpoint (of the composer and librettist). Act II (scene in the law-court – a sort of "time court" in the space of eternity, where mind seeks for truth) can be regarded as discourse about the objectivity of our ideas of truth and lie, kindness and evil.

Dramaturgical peculiarities of Kancheli's "Music for the Living" are determined by the peculiarities characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opera aesthetics: denial of the psychological poetics of representational theatre and subjective changes of romantic drama, plot schematization, tendency to depersonification, revival of Medieval morality play, application "theatre in theatre" modes, etc. "Music for the Living" can be considered a mystery-type performance, with the symbolic collision of kindness and evil.

One of the opera's peculiarities is minimization of verbal text in libretto. For instance in act I consisting of 5 scenes applied are several phrases in ancient Sumerian language and Shakespear's quote "To be or not to be?" in English. Act II consists of 3 scenes, the texts of the final two scenes are several modified quotes: "First there was chant, the chant was with God and God was the

<sup>1</sup> Such works are: J. Fowles' novel "The French Lieutenant's Woman" and its screen version, Thornton Wilder's "[The Bridge of San Luis Rey](#)", Akira Kurosava's "[Rashomon](#)" and André Cayattes's "Jean-Marc ou la Vie conjugale" and "Françoise ou la Vie conjugale".

chant”; first scene of act II is an interposed Italian melodrama, the basis of which is semantically and subjectively connected and related Italian text. In whole such fragmentary text of the opera does not mark out the subject or the plot. Its role is to put auxiliary – semantic accents, point out original emblems, semantic formulas, in which conceptual motives of the work are accumulated. The opera, the libretto of which is written by producer, becomes most significant theatrical activity. The opera libretto is an ensemble of conceptually organized metaphors. Here word is replaced by visual line, theatrical “Esperanto” of the images to be seen. Multitude of scenic images, personages in libretto indicates to the importance of theatrical poetics. Music, penetrating symphonic dramaturgy compensates fragmentary verbal text and development of the subject line in the absent sequence. Metaphoric nature of the opera libretto and liberation from libretto dictate determined the comparative autonomy of the composer’s and librettist’s intensions. Intension of the librettist is more directed to parable, that of the composer to – mystery. On the levels of subject and dramaturgy parable is the façade of the opera, whilst mystery collision is formed in its deeper layers.

Thus the cultural-aesthetic climate determined the innovatory character of B. Kvernadze’s and G. Kancheli’s operas, originality of their dramaturgy and composition, to understand their phenomenon it is necessary to discuss these works in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century world opera and other branches of arts.

### References

1. Sabinina M. Vzaimodejstvie muzykal'nogo i dramaticheskogo teatrov v XX veke. M.: Kompozitor, 2003. Interaction of Music and Drama Theatre in the XX century. Moscow: Composer, 2003 (in Russian).
2. Bayeva A. Stravinskij i opera. Stravinskij v kontekste vremeni i mesta: Sb. nauchnyh trudov MGK im. P. I. Chajkovskogo. Materialy nauchnoj konferencii, posvjashhennoj 120-letiju so dnja rozhdenija kompozitora i proshedshej v MGK 28-29 oktjabrja g.; Red. Sost. S. I. Savenko. Vyp. 57. M., 2006. Stravinsky and the opera. Stravinsky in the context of time and place: Proceedings of Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatoire. Materials of scientific conference devoted to the 120th anniversary of the composer and was held in October 28-29 at Moscow Conservatoire; Editor-compiler Savenko S. Edition 57. Moscow, 2006, 15-26 (in Russian).
3. Sukmanov I. Prikosnovenie zla, ili opernost' kak princip kinostilja. Kinovedcheskie zapiski: Istoriko-teoreticheskij zhurnal. № 21. M.: Jeizenshtejn. Centr issled. kinokul'tury, NII kinoiskusstv, 1994. The touch of Evil, or the opera as a principle of a cinema style. The notes of a film criticism: Historical and theoretical journal. № 21. Moscow: Eisenstein. The center of the film culture studies, scientific research institute of Motion Picture Arts, 1994, 171-178 (in Russian).
4. Kuryshva T. Teatral'nost' i muzyka. M.: Sov. kompozitor, 1984. Theater and music. Moscow: Soviet composer, 1984 (in Russian).
5. Mandelstam O. Slovo i kul'tura. Sost. i primech. P. Nerlera. M.: Sov. pisatel', 1987. Word and culture. Compiled and notes by Nerler P. Moscow: Soviet composer, 1987 (in Russian).
6. Stroyev A. Avtor, geroj, personazh. Hudozhestvennye orientiry zarubezhnoj literatury XX veka. Sb. trudov. Redakc. kolegija: Bazilevskij A. B., Girin Ju. N., Zverev A. N. i dr. M.: IMLI RAN, 2002. The author, hero, character. Artistic guidance of XX century foreign literature. Proceedings. Editorial board: Bazilevsky A., Giryn N., Zverev A. and others. Moscow: Institute of World Literature of the RAS, 2002, 523-538 (in Russian).